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## Hail!

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Hail!

Most of us are familiar with the very beginnings of the Christmas story when the messenger of God greeted Mary: "Hail, full of grace!" It was a very special occasion, and perhaps "Hail" is the best English word to communicate that the conversation following the greeting is unique in all of history. But, if we choose to reflect on the significance of the exchange between the angel and the young woman who was invited to be the mother of Jesus, we are free to imagine other words being used than those given to us in our present translations of the Scriptures. How might we imagine the opening of that exchange, which involves us, in the present, even though it took place in the past? We can enter the story whenever we take time to prayerfully reflect on the encounter that led to Christmas.

We are not likely to use "Hail" as a word of greeting when we speak or write to someone. With many persons, we feel comfortable with "Hi." And we have a variety of words that fit particular times of day, such as "Good morning," as well as words that we find appropriate according to our relationships with different persons. We might greet our grandmother with one word, but a recent acquaintance with another. And then, how do we address God?

Would "Hail" fit the beginning of a one-to-one conversation with God? Just as we have developed satisfying ways of greeting family members and friends, we have probably formed habits of personal spontaneous prayer, when we use our own thoughts and words rather than those that have been written down by someone else. If we reflect on the words we use and those we choose to avoid when we address God, we will learn something interesting and helpful about ourselves and about our relationship with God.

We might be surprised to recognize whether or not we use some of the same words with God as we do in greeting family members or close friends. The only rules for choosing any word (or none) is that we take into account the respect or closeness that we experience with God at this point in our lives. Just as we have become familiar with some of our friends over time, and have modified our manner of greeting from somewhat formal to an easy informality, we might find that we rarely use a word of greeting when we pray, but address God with a name or a title which arises spontaneously from the unique mix of thoughts and feelings that we have at the moment.

Sometimes we pray without using words, or begin to talk or share thoughts or concerns right in the middle of what is happening within us, for we do not have to try to gain God's attention by saying something like "Hail." We only need to turn our attention to the One who is already within our inner experiences and in all that takes place around us. And, however familiar we

might have become with God over time, we have also become increasingly respectful in our manner of communication. Informality and intimacy are not at all akin to taking someone for granted, but arise from a genuine sense of reverence for the other.

Perhaps our best use of the word in prayer is when we repeat the beginnings of the Christmas story with "Hail, Mary . . . "